Exploring Human Nature: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Cultures

Yidu Zhao

English (Multilingual), China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, 100091, China

E-mail: Zhao898198770@163.com

Abstract. Human nature, the essence of what it means to be human, has captivated scholars across cultures and time periods. The study of human nature provides valuable insights into our thoughts, behaviors, and motivations. Comparing Chinese and Western cultures in terms of human nature allows us to uncover fascinating similarities and differences that shed light on the complexities of our shared humanity. This essay aims to explore and compare various aspects of human nature in Chinese and Western cultures, delving into philosophical, social, moral, and artistic perspectives.

Keywords: Human Nature; Chinese Culture; Western Culture; Confucianism Differences.

1   Introduction

Human nature is a fascinating subject of inquiry, delving into the core of what it means to be human. Across the world, different cultures have developed unique perspectives and philosophical frameworks that shape their understanding of human nature. In this comparative analysis, we will explore the cultural nuances of Chinese and Western societies, focusing on how they perceive human nature and the implications of these perspectives on various aspects of life, such as social hierarchies, emotional expression, ecological awareness, and so on. By gaining a deeper understanding of these cultural differences, we aim to foster cross-cultural appreciation and insight into the diverse ways humanity perceives its own nature and place in the world.

2   Historical and Philosophical Perspectives on Human Nature

In the development of ethical thought in China, different views on human nature have emerged. Mr. Zhang Dainian categorized traditional Chinese philosophy on human nature as six theories: "The Theory of Innate Goodness-Mencius, later represented by Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, Wang Fuzhi, Yan Yuan, and Dai Zhen; The Theory of Neither Good nor Evil - Gaozi, later supported by Wang Anshi advocating the absence of innate goodness or evil; The Theory of Innate Evil- Xunzi; The Theory of Both

Good and Evil - Shisuo, later followed by Dong Zhongshu and Yang Xiong; The Theory of Three Aspects of Human Nature - Wang Chong, Han Yu; The Theory of Dualism - Zhang Zai explained the nature of Heaven, Earth, and individual dispositions, while Cheng brothers discussed the nature of Heaven's mandate and inherited dispositions, Zhu Xi discussed the original nature and individual dispositions, and his disciples elaborated on the moral nature and individual dispositions." Among them, the theory of innate goodness is the main tendency in traditional Chinese culture. Confucius was the first to link ethical concepts with human nature, stating: "People have similar natures, but their habits set them apart [1]." He affirmed that human nature is universal, and the differences arise from specific habits. Mencius further developed Confucius's theory and explicitly advocated the theory of innate goodness. The later ideas of "Three Aspects of Human Nature" and "Innate Goodness with Perversions" during the Tang dynasty, as well as the "Nature of Heaven and Earth" and "Innate Dispositions" theories of Zhang Zai and Cheng brothers in the Song dynasty, were all variations of the theory of innate goodness, differing only in their hierarchical distinctions in human nature: the noble person possesses innate goodness, while the base person leans towards evil. On the other hand, Xunzi presented a distinctive theory of innate evil, which was later accepted by the Legalist philosopher Han Feizi, who emphasized the importance of implementing rule of law in the state. Legalist thought briefly became dominant during the Warring States and Qin periods. However, due to the oppressive rule of the Qin dynasty, Legalism fell out of favor, and the Confucian school, led by Confucius and Mencius, gradually regained prominence and became the dominant ideology in the country, emphasizing the inherent goodness in human nature.

Compared to China, the development of Western theories on human nature emerged relatively late, with the Christian doctrine of "Original Sin" having a profound and lasting impact on Western views of human nature. According to the narrative in Genesis, God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. God allowed them to eat the fruit from any tree in the garden, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, Eve was tempted by the serpent and ate from the forbidden tree, leading Adam to do the same. Their act of disobedience to God's command is referred to as Original Sin. Original Sin is a metaphor, signifying that as descendants of Adam and Eve, humans inherently possess inclinations towards evil and sin from birth. Augustine of Hippo, a distinguished theologian and philosopher of the early Christian church, shedding light on the essence of human nature and elucidating the nexus between the soul and the divine [2]. Since Augustine's time, for over 700 years, the concept of human Original Sin has deeply influenced the minds of ordinary Western Christians. During the Renaissance and the Reformation, the notion of Original Sin was further confirmed and reinforced by radical figures like Martin Luther and John Calvin within Protestantism. In the Enlightenment era, reason and science became the focus of Western philosophical exploration, leading to a more rational understanding of human nature. However, philosophers like Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Montesquieu still primarily inherited the traditional view of human nature based on natural inclinations. Kant and Hegel even argued that evil is the driving force of historical progress. This indicates that the main tendency in Western thought regarding human nature is that it

is inherently evil, and the distinction between humans and animals lies in humanity's possession of reason.

British scholar Leslie Stevenson once pointed out, "Different views of human nature naturally led to different conclusions about what we ought to do and what we can do [3]." These beliefs have a far-reaching impact on societal norms, values, and ethics in their respective cultures. In Chinese society, the influence of Confucian values on filial piety, respect for authority, and moral education continues to shape family structures and social interactions. In Western societies, concepts of individual rights, personal autonomy, and democratic principles are influenced by Enlightenment ideas.

In summary, historical, and philosophical beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the views of human nature in both Chinese and Western cultures. These views, in turn, influence societal structures, ethical frameworks, and the way individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities within their communities.

3 Harmony with Nature and the Universe

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of harmony with nature and the Dao is deeply ingrained in the belief systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and other Chinese traditions. The Dao of Heaven or the Heavenly Dao, which is the principle that organizes and governs the universe and the material world and also means the work completed and the body retired.[4] Harmony with nature involves aligning one's actions and values with the rhythms of the natural world, recognizing the interdependence between humans and their environment. In contrast, Western perspectives on human-nature relationships have often been shaped by Christian beliefs, where humans are seen as having dominion over nature. In Man's Responsibility for Nature, John Passmore acknowledged that "Christianity has encouraged man to think of himself as nature's absolute master, for whom everything that exists was designed [5]." This view has sometimes led to a more exploitative attitude towards the environment, emphasizing the subjugation and control of nature for human benefit.

The Chinese emphasis on harmony with nature fosters a different view of human nature, emphasizing humility, adaptability, and cooperation. It sees humans as an integral part of the natural world, promoting a sense of responsibility towards preserving ecological balance. The focus on interconnectedness encourages individuals to consider the long-term consequences of their actions on the environment and future generations. On the other hand, the Western influence on the perception of human nature sometimes prioritizes human interests over ecological considerations. This phenomenon primarily stems from the Western cultural emphasis on individual rights and autonomy in their understanding of human nature, which can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy and Enlightenment-era thinking. The renowned Greek philosopher Plato, in his dialogue The Republic, emphasized the significance of reason and wisdom for individuals and society. Aristotle stressed the pursuit of individual happiness and self-realization, considering it the highest goal of life. The Enlightenment-era philosopher John Locke believed that every individual possesses natural rights, including life, liberty, and property. The legitimacy of government relies on the consent of the people, not the divine

authority of rulers. Voltaire underscored the freedom of thought and speech for individuals, opposing the suppression of ideas by the church and government, advocating that everyone should have the right to freely express their opinions. Rooted in Western culture, the emphasis on individualism in the understanding of human nature has led to anthropocentrism, where anthropocentrism has emerged. This has resulted in prioritizing human needs over ecological balance and biodiversity conservation, leading to excessive exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. Anthropocentrism as an ideology is egotistical and solipsistic, obsessed only with humans. It is clearly a significant driver of ecocide and the environmental crisis [6]. Although many Western thinkers and movements have emphasized the importance of ecological awareness and sustainability, historically, the Western emphasis on dominion over nature has led to resource exploitation and environmental degradation.

Chinese perspectives on harmony with nature and the Dao, compared to Western views on human-nature relationships, provide distinct frameworks that influence views on human nature and ecological awareness. The emphasis on harmony in Chinese traditions fosters a more interconnected and responsible approach to environmental issues, while Western perspectives have undergone a transformation to encompass ecological awareness and sustainability. Both perspectives contribute to shaping how societies interact with and perceive the natural world.

4   Perception of Emotions and Emotional Expression

Cultural differences play a significant role in the perception and regulation of emotions. In Chinese culture, there is often an emphasis on emotional restraint and suppression of overt emotional expression, especially in public settings. This perspective is rooted in Confucian principles, which promote the importance of maintaining social harmony and avoiding displays of strong emotions that may disrupt social order. In general, Confucianism emphasizes achieving social harmony through individual moral cultivation, family ethics, social etiquette, and education. For instance, Confucianism advocates the doctrine of the "Golden Mean"(Zhongyong), which promotes a balanced and harmonious way of life. The "Golden Mean" advocates handling self-cultivation and social issues with a "moderate and balanced" approach, avoiding extremes and excesses. The usage of "Confucius" as a metonym for Chinese traditional culture was introduced as a feature of the modern period [7]. Overall, the essence of Confucian thought lies in noble moral cultivation, well-regulated social systems, and the idea of handling human and social issues with virtue always and in all places. Individuals should avoid extreme behaviors and emotions, striving for moderation and balance. By following the path of the Golden Mean, individuals can interact harmoniously with others in society, promoting social harmony. Preserving social harmony is a core value pursued by Confucian philosophy, and this sense of harmony plays a significant role in traditional Chinese culture. In contrast, Western cultures often place greater value on emotional expression and individual emotional experiences. In Western views of human nature, individualistic values emphasize the autonomy and independence of individuals, considering their emotional experiences and inner worlds as unique and unparalleled. As a result,

personal emotional experiences are regarded as essential components of individual cognition and self-realization in Western culture. Openly expressing emotions is seen to foster personal growth, build authentic relationships, and promote psychological well-being.

These cultural attitudes towards emotions influence conceptions of human nature in both societies. In Chinese culture, emotional restraint is associated with self-discipline, humility, and the ability to maintain composure in challenging situations. This perspective reflects the Confucian ideal of the "gentleman" or "noble person" who possesses emotional maturity and cultivates inner harmony. On the other hand, in Western cultures, emotional expression is often linked to individual authenticity and the freedom to express one's true feelings. This perspective aligns with notions of individualism and self-expression, which are valued in many Western societies.

These different attitudes towards emotions can also impact how individuals from each culture perceive and interpret emotions in others. For instance, Westerners might perceive the emotional restraint seen in some Chinese individuals as emotional suppression or a lack of emotional depth, while Chinese individuals might view Western emotional expression as overly dramatic or lacking in self-control. Moreover, cultural attitudes towards emotions can influence how emotional experiences are understood and managed. In Chinese culture, emotional regulation often involves internalizing emotions and finding outlets for expression through more subtle nonverbal cues or artistic forms like poetry or painting. In contrast, Western cultures may encourage more direct and explicit emotional communication, such as talking openly about feelings or seeking professional therapy.

In summary, cultural differences in the perception and regulation of emotions, with the Chinese emphasis on emotional restraint and the Western emphasis on emotional expression, significantly shape conceptions of human nature in their respective societies. These cultural attitudes influence how individuals understand and interpret emotions, as well as how emotional experiences are managed and expressed. Recognizing and understanding these differences can promote cross-cultural empathy and communication.

5   Social Hierarchies and Power Dynamics

Chinese culture traditionally places a strong emphasis on social hierarchies and role-based relationships. Confucian principles, which have profoundly influenced Chinese society, emphasize filial piety, respect for authority, and the importance of maintaining harmony within the family and society. Confucius established the "School of Benevolence" (Ren Xue), where "Filial Piety" (Xiao) is one of the crucial aspects of benevolence. In Confucianism, showing filial respect to parents and revering elder siblings are considered fundamental practices of implementing benevolence and virtue [8]. These values lead to clearly defined roles and responsibilities based on age, gender, and social position, fostering a sense of order and stability. In contrast, Western ideals, particularly in modern Western societies, often prioritize egalitarianism and individual rights. The emphasis on individual freedom and equality has been influential in shaping Western

political systems and social structures, aiming to ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities and rights. In modern times, the West has established systems such as the separation of powers and adopted various specific legal measures to supervise and check those in positions of power and ordinary individuals. The Western view of human nature, which considers people as "petty individuals" and holds the belief that one becomes a true gentleman (or noble person) after being a "petty individual", has contributed to the relatively sound legal system, well-developed oversight mechanisms, and the deep-rooted concept of the rule of law in the West [9].

These differing social structures significantly influence views on human nature in both cultures. In Chinese culture, the emphasis on social hierarchies can lead to a collective mindset, where individuals prioritize the well-being of the group over personal desires. The concept of Ren (benevolence) is central to Confucianism, emphasizing the importance of cultivating virtuous character and fulfilling one's role within the social order. On the other hand, Western ideals of egalitarianism and individual rights promote the idea that all individuals are inherently equal and possess certain inalienable rights. This perspective values personal autonomy and self-determination, encouraging individuals to pursue their goals and aspirations without being overly constrained by traditional roles or societal expectations. Moreover, these views on human nature can influence how success and happiness are perceived. In Chinese culture, success may be linked to fulfilling one's role within the social hierarchy and contributing to the collective well-being. In contrast, Western societies might associate success more with personal achievements and self-realization.

6   Education Systems and Socialization

Confucianism has profoundly influenced the educational traditions of China for centuries, emphasizing the cultivation of moral virtues, social harmony, and filial piety. While primarily focusing on moral development and self-cultivation through relationships, Confucian virtue ethics is not simply about perfecting personal virtue[10]. Confucian education prioritizes the transmission of cultural heritage, moral values, and respect for authority. The Confucian educational model is characterized by rote memorization, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and a focus on classical texts such as the Confucian Analects and the Four Books.

In contrast, Western education has been shaped by a liberal arts tradition rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and Enlightenment ideals. The liberal arts curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, intellectual exploration, and the development of individual autonomy. Western educational systems prioritize a broad-based education encompassing literature, philosophy, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences. The liberal arts approach fosters creativity, innovation, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

The differing educational philosophies of China and the West have profound implications for individuals' socialization and self-conception. Confucian education instills a sense of duty, obedience, and reverence for tradition, reinforcing social hierarchies and collective identity. In contrast, Western education promotes independence, self-

expression, and critical inquiry, empowering individuals to challenge authority and pursue their own interests.

Moreover, educational systems play a crucial role in perpetuating cultural values and social norms. Chinese education reinforces Confucian values of harmony, order, and social conformity, while Western education fosters values of individualism, diversity, and intellectual curiosity. These contrasting educational paradigms shape individuals' worldviews, moral frameworks, and social behaviors, contributing to the diversity of human nature observed across cultures.

7   Artistic and Literary Representations

Chinese literature and art have a long history of exploring themes related to human nature, morality, and the human condition. Traditional Chinese literature, such as the works of Confucian scholars, Taoist philosophers, and Buddhist monks, often reflects on the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, and harmony. Classical Chinese poetry, such as the Tang and Song dynasty poems, captures the beauty of nature and the fleetingness of life, revealing insights into the human experience. In Chinese visual arts, themes of human nature are often depicted through symbolism, allegory, and metaphor. Traditional Chinese paintings, calligraphy, and sculptures convey ideas about the interconnectedness of humans and nature, the pursuit of inner harmony, and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Themes of loyalty, filial piety, and moral integrity are recurrent motifs in Chinese art, reflecting Confucian values of social order and ethical conduct.

Western literature and visual arts have also grappled with questions of human nature, identity, and morality throughout history. Western art history has traditionally regarded aboriginal art as distanced from time and place [11]. From ancient Greek tragedies to modern novels, Western literature explores the complexities of human emotions, desires, and dilemmas. Characters such as Hamlet, Don Quixote, and Anna Karenina exemplify the multidimensional nature of human psychology, depicting the struggles of existential angst, moral ambiguity, and the search for meaning. In Western visual arts, representations of human nature vary widely across different artistic movements and periods. Renaissance paintings, such as Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and Michelangelo's "David," portray ideals of beauty, proportion, and humanism, reflecting Renaissance humanist values. Similarly, Romanticism, Realism, and Surrealism offer diverse perspectives on human nature, exploring themes of individualism, alienation, and the subconscious mind.

In contemporary art and literature, globalization and cultural exchange have led to increasingly hybrid forms of expression that transcend cultural boundaries. Artists and writers from China and the West draw inspiration from diverse cultural traditions, blending Eastern and Western aesthetics, motifs, and themes. Cross-cultural artistic collaborations, exhibitions, and literary festivals foster dialogue and mutual understanding, enriching our appreciation of human diversity and interconnectedness.

Through the lens of artistic and literary representations, we gain deeper insights into the universal aspects of human nature that transcend cultural differences.

8   Conclusion

In the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures regarding human nature, we find intriguing similarities and differences. Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, harmony, and fulfilling social roles, while Western cultures prioritize individualism, autonomy, and personal fulfillment. The moral and ethical frameworks differ, with Confucian values emphasizing social harmony and responsibilities, and Western philosophies drawing on diverse religious and secular perspectives. Views on nature and the universe diverge, with Chinese culture highlighting interconnectedness and Western cultures focusing on stewardship or ecological awareness. The perception and expression of emotions also vary, with emotional restraint in Chinese culture and greater emphasis on emotional expression in Western cultures. Additionally, social structures and power dynamics differ, with hierarchical structures prominent in Chinese culture and Western cultures emphasizing egalitarianism and individual rights. Art and literature serve as mirrors reflecting the complexities of human nature.

By understanding the complexities of human nature in Chinese and Western cultures, we gain insights into the diverse ways in which humans perceive themselves, interact with others, and navigate moral and ethical dilemmas. Recognizing these similarities and differences fosters cross-cultural understanding, promotes dialogue, and encourages appreciation of the rich tapestry of human experiences.

Further research into specific cultural practices, contemporary influences, and the impact of globalization would deepen our understanding of human nature within Chinese and Western contexts. By bridging the gaps between cultures, we can foster greater empathy, cross-cultural collaboration, and a more nuanced understanding of our shared humanity.

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